

## MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 28 MARCH 2021

This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation, and adapted for the Strathfield-Homebush congregation. Today is Palm Sunday, beginning Holy Week. The usual reading for today is one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem which begins the Passion. However the sermon here takes one of the other texts from the Lectionary, one of the so-called "suffering servant" passages from Isaiah. I hope you find, as I did, that it still very much finds a valuable place in our preparation for Easter.

### 1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

(From Psalm 36)

*Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

*Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
your judgments are like the great deep;*

*you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.*

*How precious is your steadfast love, O God!*

*All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

*They feast on the abundance of your house,*

*and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*

*For with you is the fountain of life;*

*in your light we see light.*

*O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,*

*and your salvation to the upright of heart!*

O our God, we worship and adore you,

for you love us profligately and unconditionally.

Your love does indeed extend to the very heavens.

Yet we, who say we are made in your image, are so unlike you.

Where you are faithful, we are faithless;

where you are righteous, we are equivocal and compromised;

where you are loving, we are good at hating,

and even our love is conditional and fickle.

We recognise before you, O God,

that we have not done well

with the light and the life with which you have blessed us;

that we have not always acted

as those whom you have rescued from the clutches of sin and death.

The allures of this world enchant us,

and its false prophets beguile us.

We allow ourselves to become cynical and self-serving.

We are sinners, O God,

and we confess it before you and each other,

and come to you hoping for your mercy,

not because we deserve it,

but because Christ has reconciled us to you and made forgiveness a possibility.

So we pray in his blessed name,

Amen

### 2 Declaration of Forgiveness

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

Hear the good news!

God so loved the world that he gave his only son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish  
but have eternal life.  
In Christ, our sins are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings** –

Isaiah 50:4-9  
Mark 11:1-11

4 **Sermons:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer**

God our Father,  
As we approach / enter into Holy Week  
we pray that it will be a time for us to grow as disciples.  
May we know deep in our hearts  
the immensity of your love for us.  
May our hope be rekindled in the midst of our own joys and sorrows,  
knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus  
the Crucified and Risen One<sup>1</sup>.

Our father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come;  
Your will be done  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil,  
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*Who will contend with me?*  
*Let us stand up together.*  
*Who are my adversaries?*  
*Let them confront me.*  
Set you face like flint, for you are the people of God.  
The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with you now,  
and abide with you evermore.  
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.  
Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer taken from *It's All about Hope* by Chris Monaghan ©2020. Reproduced with permission from Garratt Publishing [www.garrattpublishing.com.au](http://www.garrattpublishing.com.au).

## SERMON

Today's passage from Isaiah is one of four so-called "suffering servant" passages that are found in this second section of Isaiah. Ever since the first century, Christians have associated this suffering servant with Jesus Christ. The earliest Christians were Jews, with a deep knowledge of their scriptures. "Reading backwards", they could see parallels between the suffering of Jesus at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities, and what Isaiah had described centuries earlier, of the suffering servant. Even their understanding that Jesus had died for the sins of the people had its equivalent in Isaiah. That tradition, of associating the servant with Jesus Christ, has continued ever since. You'll find it in lots of commentaries, and you'll find it in some of the preaching that surrounds the agonising events of Easter. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of this tradition in Christians' interpretation is found in Handel's great oratorio, *The Messiah*, where Isaiah's words are quoted directly as applying to Jesus.

*He was cut off out of the land of the living: the soprano soloist sings,  
for the transgressions of Thy people was He stricken.*

It's an appealing interpretation, and it's very likely that it is for this reason that we find that the Lectionary writers have included this passage from chapter 50 of Isaiah in the readings for Palm Sunday.

Now if all there was to say about this passage were that Isaiah had had a vision of the future, that he had seen some prefiguring of Jesus Christ, and that this vision had found its reality in the coming of the Messiah, then it would be a remarkably short sermon. But more importantly, it would be grossly unfair to the generations of Jewish believers, who believe that Isaiah's words have an integrity of their own, and do not need Christian hindsight to find their relevance, meaning or power. Isaiah's words meant something to the person who put them down; they meant something to the final redactor of the version we have today, and they continue to mean something to modern day Jews all over the world.

So let's look more deeply at what we have here. Although we read the book of Isaiah as one piece of writing, it is quite clearly the work of at least three different people, each working at a different time in the history of Israel.

Chapters 40-55 form the second section of Isaiah, and they're known simple as Second Isaiah. This prophet lived in the second half of the sixth century BC, when the Jews had suffered the devastation of the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the destruction of the great Temple of Solomon, and then much of their population being carried off into captivity in Babylon. It was a bleak period for the people of God. Those who were left behind in Judah lived a life of desperation and deprivation, while those taken to Babylon despaired of their future as a nation. Where was God? Why had he deserted them? Why had he allowed his sacred city, Jerusalem, and his seat of majesty, the Temple, to fall into the hands of heathens? The captivity in Babylon was an existential crisis for the Jews.

It was to those captive Jews among whom he lived in Babylon that Second Isaiah brought his words of hope. The opening words of Second Isaiah, in chapter 40, are full of solace:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,*

*that her penalty is paid ....*

That sets the tone for all of Second Isaiah. What was the reason for this hope? A new king had ascended the throne of Persia, Cyrus II. We know him as Cyrus the Great. Even before Cyrus, even as the Babylonian army had besieged and looted Jerusalem, the days of Babylon's greatness had begun to pass into history. But under Cyrus, the Persians conquered one empire after another. It was clear that Babylon's days were numbered. And the great hope that was invested in Cyrus was that he respected the customs of his subject peoples. He required political obedience and loyalty, of course, but no more. He did not engage in obliterating the cultures, or the religions, or the societies of those whom he conquered. The great hope for the captive Jews was that this Cyrus would prove their liberator.

But what is clear from the passage we have read from chapter 50 of Second Isaiah is that the prophet and his message were not always welcomed. We can only guess at why this was the case. Perhaps the Jews had become so disillusioned, so cynical, that they could not hear words that offered hope. Indeed, perhaps they felt so abandoned by God that they could not conceive that God might come to their rescue. For whatever reason, their minds were closed to the words of hope offered by the prophet; and he, it seems, paid a price in suffering because of their unwillingness to trust.

So the passage we have is deeply personal. First the prophet asserts his vocation and accredits it directly to God.

*The Lord GOD has given me  
the tongue of a teacher, he writes,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.  
Morning by morning he wakens—  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.*

His gifts, he is asserting, have been granted to him specifically to bring those words of hope to those who are weary and despairing. So he has the "tongue of a teacher", and can listen as if he were a keen student thirsty for knowledge. Furthermore, he says, he awakens every morning to a word from God. He is utterly convinced of his calling to be God's prophet.

From that conviction, the prophet finds great strength and courage, even in the face of opposition, ridicule and violence.

*.... I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backward.  
I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.*

No matter what has been dished out to him, the prophet has endured it; he has not been "rebellious" against God's calling. And he will continue to fulfil what is asked of him, and to deliver the words of hope given to him.

More than that, such is his conviction that he has been able to steel himself, to stare down his opponents, to preserve his pride and integrity, because he puts his trust in God, and God has not failed him.

*... I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame ....  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who are my adversaries?  
Let them confront me.  
It is the Lord GOD who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?*

Knowing that he is doing God's work, and that God will ultimately be his defender, the prophet can set his "face like flint". It's a wonderful metaphor for the resolve that is possible for those whom God has commissioned, and with whom he stands.

Of course history was to prove Second Isaiah correct. Cyrus the Great did indeed order the release of the captives. They were repatriated to Judah; and they were permitted to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. In a very real sense, the nation of Israel was reborn. Those opening words, "Comfort, O comfort my people", had been justified in every possible way. God had given his people a new beginning.

So this passage is far more than just a foreshadowing of the suffering Christ. What do these prophetic words from so long ago have to say to *us* today? First of all, they're a reminder that God has never left himself without witnesses, even in the most desperate of situations. There have always been, and always will be, those to whom are given the ears of a student to hear God's words, and the tongue of a teacher to proclaim in God's name; who are called to speak God's word fearlessly to those around them. Second Isaiah was called in the midst of national despair, and brought God's words of comfort and hope.

The passage is also a reminder that what can stop us hearing those word of comfort and hope are our own cynicism, our own jadedness, our own despair. Just as the exiled Jews greeted the prophet with opposition and humiliation, the passage warns *us* not to allow our own negativity to close our ears to God's word. That's a very good reminder in this time of Lent, as we look around at a world beset by a pandemic that has wrought economic dislocation and political instability; as we confront the increasingly imminent dangers of our changing climate; as we see the security of the world that we have known succumbing to new and alarming forces. Yet in God, there is always hope, and the season of Lent points us to that hope. As we look a week ahead to Good Friday, we could retreat into our despair as we contemplate the horror of the crucifixion; and yet swift on the heels of that terrible day comes Easter Sunday, the ultimate announcement of the hope that God hold out to us. Our passage admonishes us to be open to that hope, not to be imprisoned by the tragedy of the crucifixion, but to look beyond to the triumph of the resurrection. As Jesus died, and his followers despaired, so too did Jesus rise, the living symbol of the hope that he brings into the world.

If the words of Second Isaiah give us those reminders of the hope that is in God, then they are no less alive today than they were when first they were spoken. Even to us today, the prophet gently whispers in our ear, "Comfort, O comfort, my people." And perhaps his words will remind us too of the steadfast words of Paul,

*... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,  
nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Amen